

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS  
SHERMAN DIVISION**

HUGH WILTON BATES, SR

V.

COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL  
SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

§  
§  
§  
§  
§

CASE NO. 4:14-CV-404

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION OF  
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE**

The Plaintiff brings this appeal under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) for judicial review of a final decision of the Commissioner denying his claim for Disability Insurance Benefits (“DIB”). After carefully reviewing the briefs submitted by the parties, as well as the evidence contained in the administrative record, the Court finds that the Commissioner’s decision should be **REMANDED**.

**HISTORY OF THE CASE**

Plaintiff protectively filed an application for Supplemental Security Income disability benefits under Title XVI of the Social Security Act on October 10, 2011, claiming entitlement to disability benefits due to impairments of lumbar stenosis and degenerative joint disease. Plaintiff’s application was denied initially and on reconsideration. Pursuant to Plaintiff’s request, a hearing was held before an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) in Dallas, Texas on October 23, 2012. Plaintiff was represented by counsel at the proceeding. At the hearing, Plaintiff and a vocational expert, Talesia Beasley, testified.

On November 9, 2012, the ALJ denied Plaintiff’s claim, finding Plaintiff “not disabled.” Plaintiff requested Appeals Council review, which the Appeals Council denied on December 2, 2013. Therefore, the November 9, 2012 decision of the ALJ became the final decision of the Commissioner for purposes of judicial review under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). *See* 20 C.F.R. § 404.981

(2005).

### **ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE'S FINDINGS**

After considering the record, the ALJ made the prescribed sequential evaluation. The ALJ made the following findings:

1. The claimant meets the insured status requirements of the Social Security Act through December 31, 2014.
2. The claimant has not engaged in substantial gainful activity since August 15, 2010, the alleged onset date (20 CFR 404.1571 *et seq.*).
3. The claimant has the following “severe” impairments: lumbar stenosis and degenerative joint disease (20 CFR 404.1520©).
4. The claimant does not have an impairment or combination of impairments that meets or medically equals the severity of one of the listed impairments in 20 CFR Part 404, Subpart P, Appendix 1 (20 CFR 404.1520(d), 404.1525, and 404.1526).
5. After careful consideration of the entire record, the undersigned finds that the claimant has the residual functional capacity to perform light work as defined in 20 CFR 404.1567(b) except with the following limitations: occasionally stoop, kneel, crouch, crawl, and climb ladders, ropes, or scaffolds; and frequently, balance and climb ramps or stairs.
6. The claimant is capable of performing past relevant work as a mailroom sorter. This work does not require the performance of work-related activities precluded by the claimant’s residual functional capacity (20 CFR 404.1565).
7. The claimant has not been under a disability, as defined in the Social Security Act, from August 15, 2010, through the date of this decision (20 CFR 404.1520(f)).

(T.R. 24-28).

### **STANDARD OF REVIEW**

Judicial review of the Commissioner’s final decision of no disability is limited to two inquiries: whether the decision is supported by substantial evidence in the record, and whether the proper legal standards were used in evaluating the evidence. *Greenspan v. Shalala*, 38 F.3d 232, 236

(5th Cir. 1994). If supported by substantial evidence, the Commissioner's findings are conclusive and must be affirmed. *Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 390 (1971). Substantial evidence is more than a scintilla, less than a preponderance, and is such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion. *Id.* at 401. The Court may not reweigh the evidence in the record, try the issues *de novo*, or substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner. *Bowling v. Shalala*, 36 F.3d 431, 434 (5th Cir. 1995). A finding of no substantial evidence is appropriate only if no credible evidentiary choices or medical findings exist to support the decision. *Johnson v. Bowen*, 864 F.2d 340, 343-44 (5th Cir. 1988). The Court is not to substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner, and reversal is permitted only "where there is a conspicuous absence of credible choices or no contrary medical evidence." *Hames v. Heckler*, 707 F.2d 162, 164 (5th Cir. 1983).

The legal standard for determining disability under Titles II and XVI of the Act is whether the claimant is unable to perform substantial gainful activity for at least twelve months because of a medically determinable impairment. 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d), 1382c(a)(3)(A); *see also Cook v. Heckler*, 750 F.2d 391, 393 (5th Cir. 1985). In determining a capability to perform "substantial gainful activity," a five-step "sequential evaluation" is used, as described below.

### **SEQUENTIAL EVALUATION PROCESS**

Pursuant to the statutory provisions governing disability determinations, the Commissioner has promulgated regulations that establish a five-step process to determine whether a claimant suffers from a disability. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520 (1987). First, a claimant who, at the time of his disability claim, is engaged in substantial gainful employment is not disabled. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520(b) (1987). Second, the claimant is not disabled if his alleged impairment is not severe, without consideration of his residual functional capacity, age, education, or work experience. 20

C.F.R. § 404.1520© (1987). Third, if the alleged impairment is severe, the claimant is considered disabled if his impairment corresponds to an impairment described in 20 C.F.R., Subpart P, Appendix 1 (1987). 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520(d) (1987). Fourth, a claimant with a severe impairment that does not correspond to a listed impairment is not considered to be disabled if he is capable of performing his past work. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520(e) (1987).

At the fifth step, it must be determined whether claimant could perform some work in the national economy. A claimant who cannot return to his past work is not disabled if he has the residual functional capacity to engage in work available in the national economy. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529(f) (1987); 42 U.S.C. § 1382(a).

At this juncture, the burden shifts to the Commissioner to show that there are jobs existing in the national economy which Plaintiff can perform, consistent with his medically determinable impairments, functional limitations, age, education, and work experience. *See Bowen v. Yuckert*, 482 U.S. 137 (1987). Once the Commissioner finds that jobs in the national economy are available to the claimant, the burden of proof shifts back to the claimant to rebut this finding. *See Selders v. Sullivan*, 914 F.2d 614, 618 (5th Cir. 1990).

In this case, a determination was made at the fourth step.

### **ANALYSIS**

Plaintiff's first point of error is that the ALJ erred in considering his past relevant work as a mail sorter since it fell outside the 15-year time period. Work experience is relevant when "it was done within the last 15 years, lasted long enough for you to learn to do it, and was substantial gainful activity." 20 C.F.R. § 404.1565(a). Fifteen years was chosen because "[a] gradual change occurs in most jobs so that after 15 years it is no longer realistic to expect that skills and abilities acquired in a job done then [would] continue to apply [today]." *Id.* Pursuant to SSR 82-62 "work performed

prior to the 15-year period may be considered as relevant when a continuity of skills, knowledge, and processes can be established between such work and the individual's more recent occupations.” Soc. Sec. Ruling 82–62, 1982 WL 31386, at 2. The 15-year period is “the 15 years prior to the time of adjudication at the initial, reconsideration, or higher appellate level.” *Id.*

Courts in this District have often adopted a more restrictive analysis than that argued by the Commissioner. *See generally Gossett v. Barnhart*, 374 F.Supp.2d 505 (E.D. Tex. 2005). The Commissioner’s reliance on *Barnes v. Sullivan*, 932 F.2d 1356 (11th Cir. 1991) is misplaced. There, the Circuit noted contrary circuit authority but merely held that the ALJ had reason to hold that the work was performed in the 15-year period.

Although the ALJ refers to a customer service representative in his opinion, the only question asked of the VE was whether Plaintiff could perform his past work as a mail sorter. The VE did not have that information as to his past work in her file but answered that he could perform work as a mail sorter.

The Court cannot find the hypothetical relied upon by the ALJ. Evidently, the ALJ was referring to a report from one of the consultants. The total hearing comprises 10 pages and is difficult to follow given the ALJ’s interjections, the VE’s comments, and Plaintiff’s testimony.

Rules are rules, and there is some credible evidence that Plaintiff’s previous employment as a mail sorter was outside the 15-year period of consideration. Therefore, the case should be remanded for the ALJ to determine a proper SGA as relevant work and, if performed outside the 15-year period, whether there is a continuity of skills, knowledge and processes which can be established pursuant to the Commissioner’s regulations.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Pursuant to the foregoing, the Court RECOMMENDS that the decision of the Administrative Law Judge be **REMANDED**.

Within fourteen (14) days after service of the magistrate judge's report, any party may serve and file written objections to the findings and recommendations of the magistrate judge. 28 U.S.C.A. § 636(b)(1)©.

A party is entitled to a *de novo* review by the district court of the findings and conclusions contained in this report only if specific objections are made, and failure to timely file written objections to any proposed findings, conclusions, and recommendations contained in this report shall bar an aggrieved party from appellate review of those factual findings and legal conclusions accepted by the district court, except on grounds of plain error, provided that the party has been served with notice that such consequences will result from a failure to object. *Id.*; *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140, 148 (1985); *Douglass v. United Servs. Auto Ass'n*, 79 F.3d 1415, 1417 (5th Cir. 1996) (en banc), *superseded by statute on other grounds*, 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1) (extending the time to file objections from ten to fourteen days).

**SIGNED this 26th day of January, 2016.**

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
DON D. BUSH  
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE